

Sustainability Hero



February 2023



Mark and Leslie Olson

**Sustainable Ridgefield Park, Village of Ridgefield Park
(Bergen County)**

Mark Olson has served as a [Village of Ridgefield Park](#) Commissioner for three years and the chair of [Sustainable Ridgefield Park](#) for four years. Leslie Olson is in her third year as the chair of Sustainable Ridgefield Park. Together, the achievements and dedication of this married couple have resulted in an impressive creative arts program and a long list of sustainability accomplishments in the Village of Ridgefield Park. Known for straight forward and thoughtful leadership, Mark and Leslie have championed new collaborations that break down traditional silos and build partnerships across organizations, departments and municipal boundaries in Bergen County.

The Village of Ridgefield Park is a silver-certified Sustainable Jersey community. Mark said, "If it were not for Sustainable Jersey, I don't think we would have a community garden and we would not have started the journey to enhance our creative culture. Sustainable Jersey actions gave us ideas and direction to do these things and the certification process gave us the push to get them done in order achieve certification."

Ridgefield Park Mayor John Anlian has been supportive of the work since the beginning. He said, "Over the last couple of years, our Environmental Commission and green team have tackled some important issues and have introduced new programs and ideas that have and will continue to transform Ridgefield Park into a more sustainable community. Because of their dedication the Village has achieved Sustainable Jersey's silver certification, making Ridgefield Park one of only 64 municipalities to achieve this status."

The development of the arts is a strength of Sustainable Ridgefield Park's work. Mark explained, "The arts celebrate nature and build awareness and appreciation for our physical environment, its beauty, fragility and its need for stewardship." In their 2022 Sustainable Jersey certification report, the Village of Ridgefield Park achieved 75 points from Sustainable Jersey's Arts and Creative Culture actions. The benefits of this work are enjoyed by the community as they have gained public art installations, art and music festivals, an [Artist Laureate Program](#) and even a designated location on Grove Street for busking. The village received a \$2,000 Sustainable Jersey grant funded by the PSE&G Foundation to support their [Summer Arts Fest](#).



Mark and Leslie credit their parents and grandparents as their inspiration. These family members modeled the importance of public service, empathy for others, creativity and environmental stewardship. Mark grew up on a farm in Western Minnesota and Leslie is a Jersey girl who was raised growing veggies and canning the bounty with her grandmother.

A retired IT professional, Mark was Creative Bergen’s first chair and is a member of the Ridgefield Park Arts Association. Mark served on the Village of Ridgefield Park’s [Environmental Commission](#) and Planning Board for several years. Elected as one of the village’s five commissioners in 2020, Mark expanded the existing summer concert program to include arts and culture and it is now called [Concerts, Arts & Culture](#). Mark has responsibility for the village’s [Community Garden](#), [Sustainable Ridgefield Park](#) (green team), the [Ambulance Corps](#) and the [Department of Public Works](#).

Leslie is a retired communications professional. She is chair of Sustainable Ridgefield Park and Creative Bergen and she is a member of the Environmental Commission and the [Ridgefield Park Arts Association](#). Leslie and Mark have also run fundraisers with Friends of The Food Pantry of Ridgefield Park. There is a garden at the food pantry where members of the Village of Ridgefield Park Community Garden raise vegetables for the food pantry. Sustainable Ridgefield Park received an additional 10 points for this activity with the Sustainable Jersey action: [Community Gardens](#).

Village of Ridgefield Park - Sustainable Jersey Certified: The Village of Ridgefield Park has achieved silver-level certification in 2020, 2021 and 2022. Leslie said, “Key to our success is recertification every year so we are not overwhelmed with the overall task every three years. It allows a natural flow and advancement of the actions we do.” To learn more about all of the sustainability actions that Ridgefield Park has accomplished, read the [2022 Sustainable Jersey Certification Report of Ridgefield Park Village](#).

Sustainable Bergen County Hub: Mark and Leslie participate in the Sustainable Bergen County Hub. Mark said, “In Bergen County, it’s difficult to get communities to talk to each other and Sustainable Jersey has provided a vehicle for doing this through the regional hubs and the green teams. We make contact and partner with them on actions. It’s brilliant that if we work together on certain sustainability actions, both municipalities can get certification points-it encourages collaboration.” He added that green team members from Secaucus and the Borough of Bogota helped him when he was first working on Sustainable Jersey actions. Now Leslie and Mark are attending green team meetings and mentoring the City of Hackensack with their Sustainable Jersey application.



Ridgefield Park Public Arts Champions: In 2021, the Ridgefield Park Board of Commissioners passed a resolution designating the [Ridgefield Park Public Arts Champions](#) as the village’s Creative Team. The members include elected officials, artists, business leaders, educational professionals, green team members and residents. The group advises on the scope and direction of public art developed, acquired and paid for by the Village. Leslie said, “By supporting the interests of creative people, municipalities can attract and retain more of the creative energy that helps communities become more sustainable and adaptable, while providing benefits for the well-being and health of individuals and community at-large.” Sustainable Jersey includes Arts and Creative Culture actions in its program as recognition that arts contribute to various measures of sustainability in addition to diversifying local economies and attracting new investment. The Village of Ridgefield Park received ten certification points for this work with the Sustainable Jersey action: [Establish a Creative Team](#).



Public Art Element in Village of Ridgefield Master Plan: The Village of Ridgefield Park created and incorporated a Public Art Element into the Village's Master Plan that was approved in April 2022. The element details two cultural districts plus arts-related goals, objectives and strategies. Inclusion of this element was fueled by the presentation of the Public Art Master Plan, which was created for Ridgefield Park through a nine month long planning and community engagement process with the Public Arts Champions led by [Northern New Jersey Community Foundation](#), to the Planning Board and City Planner. For more information on this work, review the [Public Arts Plan Element of the 2022 Village of Ridgefield Park](#)

[Master Plan](#). The Village of Ridgefield Park received 25 Sustainable Jersey certification points for this work with the action: [Municipal Commitments to Support Arts and Creative Culture](#).

Village of Ridgefield Park Creative Assets Inventory: Under the leadership of the Public Arts Champions, the Village of Ridgefield Park developed a [creative assets inventory](#). The inventory includes a listing of community resources under categories such as: Artisans; Arts-related School Programs; Arts-related Businesses and Services; Performing Groups; Artisan/Regional Foods; Art/Cultural Organizations; Civic Organizations; Diverse Cultures in community; Cultural Landmarks and more. Mark said, "Creating the inventory opened local arts and culture dialogue, helping to make connections between them and economic, environmental and community development work already being done." They received ten certification points for this work with the Sustainable Jersey action: [Creative Assets Inventory](#).

Creative Bergen: Mark is a founding member of [Creative Bergen](#), an organization that promotes and supports art and artists in Bergen County. Mark said, "With Creative Bergen, we intentionally include people with different skill sets to be part of the team. It's not just artists. We are stronger if we incorporate people with diverse skills and backgrounds." He said in the beginning, one of the artists told him, "I didn't pay attention in accounting class, so it helps to have someone on the team who can manage the books, so I focus on the creative."

Creative Bergen's signature event has been the [Arts Amble](#). Mark is an organizer of the Arts Amble that creates opportunities not only for local artists but the community and local businesses as well. "Our inspiration was the [Meander](#) art crawl in western Minnesota where I grew up," said Mark. "They do a tour of studios featuring 40 local artists from the Upper Minnesota River Valley. We modeled what we're doing on them, and they even helped us get started." The Village of Ridgefield Park received 30 Sustainable Jersey certification points for this work with the action: [Utilizing Your Creative Assets](#).

Bergen County Hub's Styrofoam Reduction Project: The Bergen County Hub formed a Styrofoam Team that organizes collection drives to keep expanded polystyrene, or "EPS" used for packaging, out of the landfills. Thanks to their advocacy work, the Bergen County Freeholders passed a ban on XPS (or extruded polystyrene) food containers from all county property. In 2019, Sustainable Jersey presented the [Creativity and Innovation Award](#) to Fair Lawn, Glen Rock, Leonia, Oakland, Oradell, Ridgefield Park, Ridgewood and Wyckoff for this initiative. Sustainable Ridgefield Park played a central role in the Bergen Hub's Styrofoam reduction project. The green team held educational programs and was one of the collection stops. Providing this collection stop led to including a permanent EPS recycling program by the Ridgefield Park Department of Public Works as part of their recycling center. Residents bring EPS to a special bin at the recycling center.



Collaboration with the Schools: Mark and Leslie have been working to establish ties between the municipal and school green teams. Sustainable Ridgefield Park invited a 7th grade civics class and their Middle School Principal, Dyan Thiemann, to attend a municipal green team meeting. Mark made a special presentation to the students about the goals of the green team. The students were interested in learning more about recycling and were excited about the idea that they could serve as recycling role models to their classmates. After the discussion, Mark arranged for more recycling containers to be provided to the school and invited the students to volunteer with the green team and the Environmental Commission.



More About Mark and Leslie: Mark and Leslie have lived in Ridgefield Park for 40 years. Leslie enjoys a good book, cooking and canning. Mark is a woodworker and spends his free time carving bowls out of fallen trees that he donates to the arts association fundraisers. They enjoy traveling across the United States by car to places like the Midwest and the New York Finger Lakes.